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ABSTRACT

This guide for volunteer teachers of English as a Second Language to Spanish speakers in a home-based program outlines a suggested format for class time and activities. The guide describes how teachers can organize their class periods to promote learner-centeredness and participation in the English learning process. The structure, designed to help organize time, consists of: an opening song, chant, or poem (5 minutes); silent reflection or relaxation (1 minute); check-in (15-20 minutes), a bilingual, round-robin activity for sharing experiences; inquietudes (15-20 minutes), in which students' unresolved questions about English are addressed; planned language activities (60-80 minutes), organized according to student interests, needs, and relationships but having specific language-learning objectives; a group evaluation discussion (5-10 minutes), a time set aside to assess the class session and find ways to improve the quality of future class meetings; and dialog journal writing (10-15 minutes). Suggestions for adapting each of these time segments to suit class needs are included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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# SUGGESTED STRUCTURE FOR MEETINGS OF HOME-BASED ESL CLASSES FOR NATIVE SPEAKERS OF SPANISH

by David Spener

This document was written for use by volunteer ESL literacy teachers working in Washington, DC with the Spanish Education Development Center's project called **INGLES EN SU CASA** (English at Home). It describes how teachers can organize their class periods to promote learner-centeredness and participation in the English acquisition process. The format described was used by the author with the classes he taught for **INGLES EN SU CASA** in 1988-1989. It does not represent official policy or practice at the Spanish Education Development Center.

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## INGLES EN SU CASA

### SUGGESTED STRUCTURE FOR APARTMENT-BASED CLASSES

For a two hour class, INGLES EN SU CASA suggests that you follow the following structure in the order given here:

**Song/chant/poem** (5 minutes)

**Silent reflection** (1 minute)

**Check-in** (15-20 minutes)

**Inquietudes** (15-20 minutes)

**Planned Activities** (60-80 minutes)

**Group Evaluation Discussion** (5-10 minutes)

**Dialog Journals** (10-15 minutes)

You will find that this structure is a good guide to follow to help organize your time in class. Of course you can and should vary this structure in accordance with the specific circumstances of your class and for the sake of variety itself. You may find, for example, that you need more time for a planned activity and that it makes sense to have Check-in, Inquietudes or Dialog Journals only once that week. Or you may want to go on a field trip or invite a special guest to the class. Below follows an explanation of each activity named above, with approximate lengths of time to allow for each. A total meeting length of 2 hours is assumed here. (With a 3 hour class, we suggest a lengthening of the Language Learning Activities section).

**Special Note:** When you begin teaching your class, you will have to spend extra time "teaching" the different pieces of the structure of the class itself. The result will be that the time needed to complete certain parts of the class, e.g. Check-in and Group Evaluation Discusssion will be longer until you and the class master the process together.

## SONG/CHANT/POEM (5 minutes)

No matter how hard you try, people will come to class late. They may also come to class without having spoken or heard much English since the last class. Or they may arrive on time but with their minds still at work or on the bus or back home in Guatemala. You need a good warm-up activity at the beginning of the class. Those that arrive on-time will get their English "juices" flowing again. Those that arrive late will not have missed anything that they need for the rest of the class. Beginning the class with a song, a jazz chant, or group recitation of a poem is a good way to "warm-up". Use a song/chant/poem that the class has already learned. "Warm-up" is not the time when you want to teach something new. It's the time to practice something familiar.

## SILENT REFLECTION (1 minute)

At the end of the warm-up activity, have a moment of silence. This gives everyone in the class a chance to relax for a moment before getting into the "meat" of the class. It lets class members reflect for a minute before the check-in activity and gives late comers a chance to cool down and get centered before the class proceeds. Some people may not be accustomed to silence in an English class and may laugh or giggle from embarrassment. This is alright. A good idea is to have everybody stand in a circle, hold hands, and close their eyes for a minute together. This helps ensure that there is really a moment of silence for everyone in the class.

**CHECK IN** (15-20 minutes)

Check-in gives each member of the class an opportunity to share experiences from outside class with other class members. It is a multi-faceted activity. At one level, it is a community-building exercise that helps the class get to know itself better and to draw upon resources from within the group to help individual members. At another level it is an English teaching activity, giving students a chance to practice conversation and build their vocabulary as it relates to their emotions and life situations. At yet another level, it is a way for you the teacher to gather relevant information about your students' lives that may later be incorporated into English lessons or the overall curriculum for INGLES EN SU CASA.

Check-in is a bilingual round-robin activity. The activity is initiated and facilitated in English, but a student can "check-in" in Spanish when she doesn't have the needed vocabulary in English. In such cases, you or a more advanced student can model the English vocabulary needed for her to express her ideas. With class members seated in circle, each member responds to the following questions:

**How do you feel tonight? Why?**

**Can you tell us one of your successes since the last class? What was it?**

**Can you tell us one of your difficulties since the last class? What is/was it?**

For the first question, it is important that the members respond meaningfully. The idea is to explore the language and the dimensions of emotional experiences. As such, the response "fine" is not useful. At the beginning, discuss the fact that "fine" is the same as saying "alive" (vivo) or "here" (aquí). In other words, it communicates no real information. Insist that everybody responds with something more concrete and specific. If students are uncomfortable with beginning, you can go first.

Example:
A: How do you feel tonight?
B: I feel **desanimada porque me están aumentando las horas en mi trabajo pero no me pagan más.**
A: You feel "**down**". (Writes "desanimada" and "down" on newsprint). Repeat with me: "I feel down."
B: I feel down.
A: Why do you feel down?
B: I feel down because (pauses) No sé decirlo en English.
A: Can anybody help her?
C: Because she have to work more hours, but they doesn't pay her more.
A: Right. Let's repeat together. **"I have to work more hours, but they don't pay me more."** (Writes on newsprint). Again. "I have to work more hours, but they don't pay me more." Copy that down in your notebooks.

The next two questions are designed to get the students to reflect on their own status and to recognize and communicate what's going well in their lives and what continues to be problematic. It's important that everyone understands that the questions don't pertain to the English class or their advance or decline in English ability, but rather to their lives outside of class. If a student has an unresolved difficulty, ask if anybody in the class has any ideas for helping to solve it. As the class becomes more versed in the check-in process, you can have the students actually ask the questions among themselves and you can serve more as a resource than as a facilitator.

As a teacher, you may find that students resist participating in the check-in. You yourself may be wondering at this point what you can do with the material generated by this activity. First, you should write down the new vocabulary generated on sheets of newsprint so the class can see it and copy it and analyze its meaning and pronunciation.

Second, you can take the newsprint sheets home with you and type up some or all of the results into a weekly report on the class that you can then give back to the students for reading practice. You can either read the report out loud, or you can include comprehension questions for the students to answer.

Additionally, you can do spelling dictations with new vocabulary words--either letter-by-letter or whole words or sentences, depending on the level(s) of your class. In this way students learn English that comes from their own lives and that already has meaning for them.

## INQUIETUDES (15-20 minutes)

Your class will have an agenda or syllabus to follow. (See "Setting an Agenda with Your class"). It will in large measure determine the specific aspects of the English language that students will be learning in the class. At the same time, however, students are bombarded with new words, phrases, and expressions in English every day that may not naturally come up in class if you only follow the syllabus.

Students have "inquietudes" about English, that is, unresolved questions in their minds about what different things that they have seen or heard mean. So spend about 15-20 minutes of class time addressing students' inquietudes--discrete questions that can be answered succinctly at the level of meaning. In other words, vocabulary questions or questions about idioms, not how to form the past perfect in English or to master the use of the conditional in polite requests.

Several things are important in dealing with inquietudes effectively. First, get students in the habit of asking their questions in English. All your students should quickly master the question, "What does _____ mean?". It may be difficult to understand what is contained in the blank. If it was something a student read, ask her to write it out or spell it for you. (How do you spell it?) If it was something she heard, ask her to say it slowly, while you write it out syllabically as if it were a word in Spanish. (e.g., jom = home).

Writing and sounding words out this way syllabically, you may be able to "see" what the student heard outside of class. Then you can write out the word or phrase in English under the Spanish-phonetic rendition of it so the class can see the sound/letter correspondence between the two.

If you still can't decipher what the student heard, ask her where she heard it and who said it. Usually the context will enable you to understand the inquietud.

An inquietud may also consist of wanting to be able to say something and not knowing how. Teach students, "How do you say _____ in English?", filling in the blank with the word or phrase in Spanish. Again, make sure you establish the context of the inquietud as you attempt to resolve it.

You can reinforce new vocabulary learned during the INQUIETUDES section of the class in some of the same ways as you do in CHECK-IN. If only your most "advanced" students have inquietudes to share the first few class meetings, give homework assignments that consist of bringing 1-3 inquietudes to discuss in the next class.

**PLANNED ACTIVITIES** (60-80 minutes)

INGLES EN SU CASA classes are organized on the basis of family relationships, geographic location, and time of meeting, not according to the level of English of the students. Most, if not all, INGLES EN SU CASA classes will have a mixture of English and native language literacy levels represented. As a result, English needs to be taught as it relates to a subject matter of interest to all the students regardless of their individual level in English.

The "form" of the language--grammar, spelling, pronunciation, etc.-- gets taught in such a way that it is subordinate to the content of the lesson. You still teach verbs, pronouns, and sound-letter correspondences, but not as the principle content of the class. Rather, you teach the "form" of the language in order to facilitate communication within the context of the communicative task or situation at hand.

Planned activities have specific language-learning objectives based on your class's study agenda and the SED Center's curriculum resources. INGLES EN SU CASA staff will help you choose and plan these activities in accordance with the specific characteristics of your class through training sessions at monthly teachers meetings, class visits, and individual consultations at the SED Center's offices at 1840 Kalorama Road Northwest. (See also "Setting an Agenda with Your Group", "Lesson Planning Worksheet", and "SED Curriculum for ESL: Amnesty Program".)

**GROUP EVALUATION DISCUSSION** (5-10 minutes)

How well a class session goes on a given occasion depends on many factors: the mood of the instructor and the students, the design of the activity, the preparation of appropriate materials, the state of the home environment, the willingness of the students to risk embarrassment in a new situation, the degree of preparation of the teacher, whether or not the students did their homework; the list goes on.

The important thing to realize is that the results of a given class meeting depend on the students as much as on the instructor. For this reason, it's important to evaluate the class session together as a group to find ways to improve the quality of future class meetings. You may omit the CHECK-IN or the INQUIETUDES parts of the class structure, but you should never omit the EVALUATION.

You can conduct the evaluation completely in Spanish, or you can conduct bilingually as in the CHECK-IN above. Consider briefly the following questions, recording the responses on newsprint in front of the class:

**¿Cuáles fueron los puntos débiles de esta clase?**
**What were the weak points of this class?**

**¿Cuáles fueron los puntos fuertes?**
**What were the strong points?**

**¿Qué pudiera hacer mejor el maestro/la maestra?**
**What could the teacher do better?**

**¿Qué pudiera hacer mejor los estudiantes en la clase?**
**What could the students do better?**

**¿Qué otro cambio podemos hacer para mejorar la forma en que se desarolla la clase?**
**What other changes could we make to improve the way class is held?**

Make an effort as a group to put suggestions for improvement into practice, continually analyzing the effectiveness of the different changes implemented by the class. Remember here that you, too, as the teacher can and should participate in this discussion. As in CHECK-IN, you can eventually have the students themselves facilitate this discussion.

## DIALOG JOURNALS (10-15 minutes)

A dialog journal is a series of letters written between student and teacher contained in a notebook that is passed back and forth every class session. The student writes a short letter to the teacher about any topic or questions that are on her mind, and the teacher writes back.

The goal of dialog journals is to develop reading and writing skills in English in a realistic communicative situation revolving around the student's personal interests and experiences. The teacher does not explicitly correct the student's errors in English, but rather reformulates what student's have written in responding, thus giving them a native-speaker model to which she can aspire.

Here's how you can introduce dialog journals to your class:

1. Get enough blue test books from INGLES EN SU CASA for your class. Get one for each student, one for yourself, and a few extras for mess-ups or newcomers. Write student names on the front cover.

2. Write a short (1 paragraph or less) letter in English to each student on the first page of his blue book. Try to tailor the level of difficulty to the individual. If the student understands absolutely no English, go ahead and write them in Spanish, but include date, salutation, and an appropriate closing in English. Sign your name. Make sure you include some question that requires the student to respond to your letter.

3. Leaving 10-15 minutes at the end of class, hand out the blue books. .

4. Explain to students that you will be writing letters regularly in class to practice reading and writing English. Model writing the date, the salutation, and the closing in English on a sheet of newsprint before they begin writing their letters.

5. Ask students to read your letter and then write a letter back to you answering your questions. Let them know that the letter is private and that only you will read it. Ask students to write you the letter in English. Tell them that they have until the end of class to complete writing their letter to you. If they don't know how to say something in English, they can write it in Spanish.

6. If students don't understand something you have written to them, have them raise their hand to ask you what it means. Encourage them to ask you the question in English. (What does this mean?)

7. At the end of class, collect the blue books and take them home with you to read. If some students haven't finished their letter yet, give them another or minute or so to close the letter. Let them know that they will have an opportunity to continue their idea in the next letter.

**Note:** If one or more students in your class are completely illiterate in their native language (i.e., they can't write you anything even in Spanish), ask them if there is someone at home that reads and writes to whom they can dictate their letter in Spanish. It might be another member of the class. While other students are writing letters in their blue books, give illiterate students writing exercises to work on silently.

Now, you are at home reading the letters. They should be short, especially if they are written entirely in English. Read the letters, making a mental note of any errors in English. Do not make any corrections on the letters themselves. Instead, pick one or two errors from the letter, the ones that are either the most serious or the easiest to model correctly, and below the letter write the word, phrase, or sentence as a native speaker would say or write it. That way the student can make her own comparisons and corrections.

If a student writes all or part of his letter in Spanish, pick a word or phrase that you could easily translate into English and copy the original phrase and its translation at the bottom of the student's letter.

Next, write your letter back to the student. Try to repeat things the student wrote to you, correcting them implicitly. Ask more questions about what she wrote. Give similar information from your own experiences. For example:

Student wrote: Mi mothar she liv en Cochabamba.

You write back: You say your mother lives in Cochabamba. Who does she live with there? My mother lives in New York City. She lives with my father, my grandmother, and my little brother.

You have accomplished several things here. First, you have "corrected" the student's errors by modeling a correct form; second, you have "pushed" the student to expand upon her original statement; and third, you have modeled a potential response for her.

Your letters to your students, and their letters to you should be short and exchanged on a regular basis. Don't give the dialog to the students to do for homework. Doing them in class ensures that they are short (remember you'll be reading and responding to up to 10 letters/class), that they really get done, and that there is no long delay between when a letter is written and when the response is received.

Try to incorporate language studied in class in your letters, and encourage students either in conversations or in your letters to them to use things learned in class in their letters to you. This is especially important for real beginners or semi-literate students who write entirely in Spanish at the outset.

The dialog journals belong to the students. When they fill up their blue books, they can keep them. Their grandchildren will surely enjoy reading them, if not the students themselves, a few years down the road when they speak English fluently.